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ABSTRACT

The states should expand their efforts to provide literacy education to state employees, regardless of the type of job they hold or where their job is located. Every government agency whose employees work with or have contact with persons likely to need literacy education should assume identification and referral responsibilities. Likewise, literacy related to work potential or constructive community living should be part of every corrections system. Screening and referral should be required in government contracts with nonprofit and private agencies receiving government money to serve those in need of literacy education. Buildings over which states have control, especially in high-illiteracy neighborhoods, should be available for appropriate literacy activities, as should computers and other technology purchased with tax money. States should encourage multiple approaches and diverse leadership of literacy initiatives and should insist on accountability from programs benefiting from state action. Any rules and regulations working against the use of volunteers as tutors, teaching assistants, or program managers should be changed as should any regulations that may preclude marketing support for literacy programs. State governments can play a critical role in encouraging and coordinating literacy efforts. (MN)

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Working Paper
Re: State Literacy Principles and Practices

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April 1988

Here are some principles and practices for state government literacy leadership gleaned from The Literacy Challenge proposals and projects as well as assorted other sources.

Whether and how they are accomplished depends on the situation in each state--its resources; its "state of the art" in development of a diverse, lasting literacy system; and its political, economic and caring climate.

Nonetheless, these seem to be the minimum standards to expect from state government in a fully developed adult literacy system:

1. In-house state employee literacy programs. A few states offer help to public works employees. But in addition, consider every kitchen, supply room, mail room, building and grounds crew and similar operations. (I'm tempted to consider employee programs "litmus test" of a governor's commitment. Surely, a governor should be willing to do for state employees what the private workplace is expected to do. It also happens to be a good way to establish model programs, at least in those government work areas that have private sector counterparts.)

2. Every government agency whose employees work with or have contact with high-incidence and average-incidence publics should assume identification and referral responsibilities. Variations are being tried--from mandated literacy help to voluntary referral. Questions relate to the effectiveness of voluntary referral compared with required participation (does required participation improve motivation, and, if so, for what publics? Or does it build resentment, slowing or defeating the purpose?) Meanwhile, information and referral should be routine--in health and social services, driver and motor vehicle licensing, etc. And do we dare consider the day when reading will be necessary for licensing of drivers and any other specialists licensed and allowed to take oral tests? I don't know how many oral tests exist or for what licensing. But perhaps any is too many.

3. Literacy related to work potential and to constructive community living should be part of every corrections system and considered as appropriate within justice system checks and options.

4. Screening and referral should be required in government contracts with nonprofit and private agencies receiving government money to serve those in-need publics.

5. Buildings over which the state has control, especially those in neighborhoods of high incidence, should be available for appropriate literacy activities--whether sign-up, classes, tutoring, training or simply screening and referral of residents. This would apply to those that the state, in effect, controls through service contracts or subsidies (public housing, for instance).

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6. Computers and other technology equipment purchased with tax money (whether federal, state or local) should be available for literacy services when not needed for their primary function (apparently school districts in various parts of the country still limit their computers to daytime classes, for instance).

7. States should help finance the services needed as a result of state policies, practices, etc. This includes paying the volunteer base groups for training, some support of a state-level clearinghouse, and other costs.

8. States should encourage multiple approaches and diverse leadership, in keeping with the explanations in "Enhancing Adult Literacy: A Policy Guide" published by The Council of State Policy & Planning Agencies (CSPA). How depends on what other approaches are being taken.

9. Perhaps obviously, perhaps not, any tax breaks allowed other kinds of employee training should count as well for literacy and basic education training. (Employers, especially in states and regions with minimal unemployment, should be expected to finance all or substantial costs for their existing workforce and for the pool that will generate employee referrals.)

10. States can and should insist on accountability from programs benefiting from state action (again the CSPA book is a valid reference).

11. Money. At least the full JTPA 8 percent needs to be used; adult basic education budgets need to go up--not without strings, perhaps, but up. (Some governors and legislatures are talking education reform and adult literacy without putting anything more than the required 10 percent match into ABE.)

12. Any rules and regulations working against the use of volunteers as tutors, teaching assistants, program managers, etc. need to be changed.

13. In working with the non-government parts of the state, state folks can take the lead in seeing that literacy activities get institutionalized in ways that can transcend current leaders. And they should. Again, a litmus test: If the governor's serious, he should want the effort to last as long as necessary to reduce illiteracy. A campaign that could die with the end of an individual's tenure is almost worse than no program at all.

14. Is it possible that utility regulations preclude marketing support when their own equipment can be sold as part of the solution? Our Rhode Island project is exploring that--having been turned down earlier in "charity" requests because of regulations. But in fact, if the telephone conferencing continues on the high success level with which it's started, the telephone company's marketing people should be eager to support demonstrations, to produce the sales material and maybe even provide some or all of the training in use of the material.

15. As fast as the adult literacy basics are in place, they should be tied with the rest of school reform. Whichever place gets the citizens involved and generates new knowledge about how to help people learn quickly and effectively should be sharing its learnings and energies with the other.

16. The Indiana project is experimenting with certification standards. A voluntary program developed cooperatively just might help answer some of the questions about accountability for government, funders and private purchasers of service as well.

17. Most states probably need an inter-departmental and inter-branch literacy task force. It will do no good for the judiciary to start mandating literacy services if the education arm cannot produce them or the legislature will not fund the services.

18. Likewise, the state obviously needs high-level involvement with the rest of the state's literacy movement. No point in raising expectations of help or of places to help if the system is not ready to accommodate the new interest. Liaison and coordination can help all parts move forward faster.

19. The state government can play a critical role in getting all providers to use the same measures, whether they convert to a statewide standard or develop some approach that will let them maintain their existing approach and quickly and easily translate their records to the statewide format. The "grade level" measure <u>isn't</u> the right one, however.

Another observation or two:

1. I'm convinced that each state should have a state-level clearinghouse, probably outside of government, prepared to do at least preliminary screening of callers--potential learners and potential volunteers--to help target referrals to the most appropriate local programs, but working far beyond that basic information and referral. The clearinghouse needs to know the content and caliber of each program in the state. It should have people resources identified--tutor trainers, trainers of classroom aides, program evaluators and all of the other kinds of people literacy programs need to continue improving what they do. Likewise, it should know the "works in progress" of programs within the state and, ideally, the state of the art in key areas from state policy development to use of technology. If not the specifics on those things, then the reference.

2. The Immigration Reform and Control Act is about to generate greater increases in demand than even PLUS did, at least in the top ten or so states. The whole state literacy system needs to be ready. Among other long-term benefits, it will bring literacy people and those who have traditionally worked with immigrants and refugees into working contact that could serve future constructive purposes.